

# *A New International Policy for the U.S. Department of Education*

## **PART I: Policy Statement**

### **Rationale**

The mission of the U.S. Department of Education is primarily a domestic one. Our mission is *to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation*. Yet to fulfill that mission in today's global environment, the Department increasingly needs to be engaged in a broad range of international programs, activities, and relationships, involving nearly every one of its principal offices. As the lead federal agency in the area of education policy, the Department also works with the U.S. Department of State and other agencies to fulfill the federal government's responsibility in foreign affairs.

Department of Education programs and activities support the development of international knowledge, expertise, and initiatives in America's schools and classrooms at the elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult education levels. Research and statistical activities compare system characteristics and student performance across nations. The Department has formal agreements with about a dozen countries, and is often approached to develop new relationships, participate in international projects and comparative studies, play a role in conferences and meetings in distant parts of the globe, and provide knowledgeable officials to brief foreign counterparts on the Administration's policies and programs. Well over 1,000 international visitors come to the Department each year, including Ministers of Education, educators, journalists, members of national legislatures and others, seeking to share views on topics ranging from educational technology to special education, and from family involvement in education to higher education finance. Department information centers and web sites provide international information to over 8,000 callers and Internet users each month.

Simply put, Americans and the world are interested in education in a sustained and visible way that has rarely, if ever, been evident in the past. Education is recognized almost universally as a fundamental building block of economic and personal growth, functioning democracy, and mutual understanding among peoples. From the G-8 Summit meetings to Leaders' and Ministers' Meetings in Asia and the Pacific, Europe, the Americas, and Africa, education has taken its place alongside trade, security, migration and other global issues as a topic to be discussed by world leaders.

And the world is interested in *U.S.* education. The United States is seen as a world leader in promoting equal access to education, and in areas such as decentralized governance, student assessment and accountability, effective family/community engagement in education, special education and rehabilitation services, and higher education. Our views and engagement are constantly sought. The U.S. Department of Education is a point of entry for many foreign officials seeking closer ties with U.S. educators.

At the same time, U.S. citizens recognize as never before the extent to which their security and prosperity are linked to developments in the rest of the world. September 11 jolted many more Americans into the realization that borders are easily crossed by terror as well as by information and commerce, and gave urgency to teachers' efforts to help their students understand the world in which we live. Americans understand the importance of such efforts. A recent poll revealed that over 70 percent of the American public supports foreign language and international studies requirements in high school and/or college, and more than one-third of college-age students polled said they are more likely to take courses that focus on other countries, cultures, or global issues today than before September 11. Yet many observers believe our educational system is not prepared to meet the apparent demand or the urgent challenge of increasing U.S. students' international knowledge and skills. For example, the National Commission on Asia in the Schools found that:

*"Vast numbers of U.S. citizens – particularly young Americans – remain dangerously uninformed about international matters. They lack even the rudimentary knowledge of world affairs and cultures beyond our borders that is necessary to lead America in today's global environment."*

In response, President Bush has urged Americans to learn more about the rest of the world. In November of 2001, the President stated:

*America's leadership and national security rest on our commitment to educate and prepare our youth for active engagement in the international community. I call on schools, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders to promote understanding of other nations and cultures by encouraging our young people to participate in activities that increase their knowledge and appreciation for global issues, languages, history, geography, literature, and the arts of other countries.*

**The U.S. Department of Education should be a partner in responding to this call,** and a source of help to those seeking answers to some of the most important questions of our day: *What do our children and our adults need to know in order to be successful in today's – and tomorrow's – global economy? How can we ensure they learn what they need about other societies, cultures and languages, and that they are prepared to work with others to solve global problems? How can we ensure that people abroad learn about who we really are? How can our educational services benefit from an international dimension, and how can they be promoted as part of our nation's efforts to improve America's security and competitiveness?* A bold statement of the Department's international role, highlighting our existing programs and activities and proposing a limited set of meaningful new initiatives, could provide help to educators and other Americans and form an important part of President Bush's legacy.

### **A Proposed New International Policy for the U.S. Department of Education**

*It is the policy of the Department of Education to:*

- *Support and expand U.S. efforts to increase knowledge and expertise about other world regions and cultures, other languages, and international issues;*
- *Share information about U.S. education policy and practice, provide leadership on education issues in appropriate international forums and settings, and work with appropriate partners in other countries on initiatives of common benefit;*
- *Learn about effective practice and comparative educational performance in other countries in order to help to improve and enhance U.S. education; and*
- *Support U.S. foreign and economic policy by strengthening relationships with other countries in the field of education and by helping to promote U.S. education.*

The Department of Education intends to implement this policy by building on the foundation of international programs and initiatives that it currently administers, and by incorporating an international dimension into appropriate programs, initiatives, and activities that it is authorized to pursue. The Department intends to review and revise its Strategic Plan to incorporate international education into relevant goals and objectives. In addition, Department products and services, including those in print and electronic formats, will provide international information that is accessible and useful to American schools, educators, students, parents, and the public, as well as to our international education partners.

In carrying out this policy, the Department of Education is building on its strengths and competencies:

- as the Cabinet-level voice for American education, the Secretary speaks with authority to both the U.S. education community and to educational authorities and other audiences abroad;
- as a natural broker of contacts between expert practitioners at the state, local, and non-governmental levels in the United States and educational authorities abroad, and a natural convener for discussions on education policy issues with international implications;
- as the federal government's education policy agency, with valuable expertise sought by other countries in areas like statistics, civil rights, special education and rehabilitative services, student financial assistance, and others; and
- as a major funder of activities of national significance in education that also have an international dimension.

The Department's international role complements and supports the international roles of the nation's foreign policy agency, the U.S. Department of State, and other U.S. government agencies. The Department will work actively to coordinate with and avoid duplicating the work of other entities.

As the Department of Education considers possible new efforts under the international policy, it will also be guided by the following criteria:

- the potential to benefit our customers (primarily U.S. students, their families, and educators at all levels);
- the potential to support key Administration education priorities;
- the availability and interest of appropriate partners in the United States and abroad;
- the potential to successfully generate a desired concrete product or outcome;
- the potential to contribute to U.S. foreign and economic policy objectives; and
- compatibility with the Department's program authority, budget, and staffing.

Part II of this document provides detail on the Department's current and planned international programs and activities, along with ideas for possible new initiatives that support the Department's international policy.

*Drafted by ED/OUS/International Affairs Staff November 2002*